

On the Chinese in subordinate conditional clause formed by the particle *NE*

A constructionist perspective

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Insubordination is generally defined as “the conventionalized main clause use of what, on prima facie grounds, appear to be formally subordinate clauses” (Evans 2007: 367). As illustrated in (1), the isolated *if*-conditional clause can be used to make a request without the apodosis.

(1) *If you could give me a couple of 39c stamps please.* (Evans 2007: 380)

Recently, such in subordinate clauses have attracted considerable interest and been associated with various discourse/interactional functions cross-linguistically (e.g., Evans 2007, Van Linden & Van de Velde 2014, Evans & Watanabe 2016, Lindström et al. 2016, D’hertefelt 2018).

The current study focuses on a certain type of in subordinate interrogative clause in Chinese ended with the particle *NE* of rising intonation, i.e. [VP+ *NE*?]. Previous studies have pointed that *NE* can function as a topic marker (Fang 2016). Similar to many conditionals that function as topics in discourse (Chao 1968, Haiman 1978), this kind of clause simultaneously involves a conditional meaning, i.e. ‘If VP, what would you do/what will happen?’. Crucially, such in subordinate conditional clause formed by *NE* (henceforth ICN clause) is often marked by a typical conditional connective such as *yàoshi*, *rúguǒ*, *wányī* as well, as in (2).

(2) *Yàoshi tā bù lái ne?*
if he NEG come NE
‘If he doesn’t come (what would you do)?’

Therefore, structurally the ICN clause can be regarded as an in subordinate conditional clause, with the conventionalized ellipsis of the main clause (e.g., *nǐ zěnméibàn* “what would you do”, *huì zěnmeyàng* “what will happen”). Functionally, this clause is self-sufficient and is usually used to modify preceding discourse, i.e. to add a new condition according to the interlocutor’s prior utterance and ask for his/her opinion, as in (2). Furthermore, as illustrated in (3), the ICN clause may also be used to raise an objection or reject the interlocutor’s request in a conversation. Either way, the ICN clause seems to function as a dispreferred response to the interlocutor’s prior utterance (i.e. to add a new task or threaten the interlocutor’s face).

(3) A: *Nǐ bǎ wǒde jiànglǔsǎn huán gěi wǒ!*
you PREP my parachute return PREP me
‘Give me back my parachute!’
B: *Wǒ yàoshi bù huán ne?*
I if NEG return NE
(lit.) ‘If I don’t give it back to you (what will happen)?’ (i.e. ‘No, I won’t give it back to you!’)

Previous studies have mainly focused on the functions of *NE* in various contexts. However, as illustrated above, the ICN clause as a whole has acquired some specific discourse functions of its own. Therefore, from a constructionist perspective (Goldberg 1995, 2006; Croft 2001), we recognize it as a conventionalized in subordinate construction in its own right. The ICN construction can be located within a constructional network (Figure 1) linked with related constructions of different levels of schematicity, through formal or functional analogy (cf. Kaltenböck 2016).

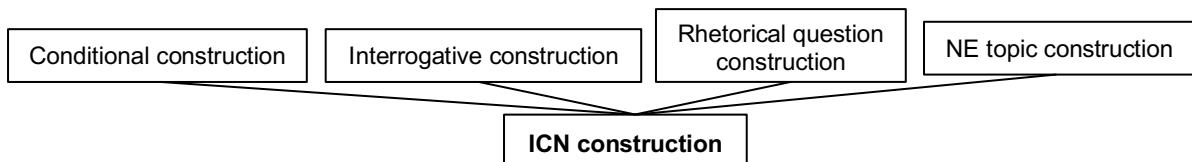


Figure 1 The constructional network for ICN construction

The current study contributes to the typological analysis of in subordination by providing an interesting case of Chinese in which in subordinate conditional construction emerges in an interrogative form and functions as a dispreferred response in a conversation.

References

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